

## Chapter 6:

# A Look at the Process

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## What Will You Need?

What does it take to start a charter school? Here, we give you a list of the essential elements, as well as some tips on how to best tackle them.

### **Common vision<sup>1</sup>**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the single most important attribute of the successful charter school is a clear sense of purpose and mission shared by parents, students, staff, and the school's board of directors. It is also necessary to agree on a common vision of what your school will look like day-to-day. A common vision guides the school's decision-makers in every aspect of planning and operations.

- It gives potential employees, prospective students, and parents clear indications of how they will be treated and what will be expected of them.
- It explains to chartering agencies and the community at large how this charter school is distinct from other public schools.
- It provides a basis for decisions by foundations to support the school.
- It gives prospective lenders confidence that key personnel and constituencies have the level of commitment and purpose necessary to make the school financially viable.

This common vision may exist in the mind of one person who articulates it to others and recruits a cadre of like-minded individuals, a situation familiar to business entrepreneurs. It may grow from sustained discussion among people living in the same community, a route more familiar to many "kitchen table" charter applicants. However it is developed, the vision is the critical cornerstone of the start-up process, and school planners are advised to develop it clearly before taking concrete steps toward creating a school.

### **Expertise**

Developing a strong proposal for a charter school requires a team with diverse skills and experience. This team should be able to collectively define the school's mission and integrate its educational program, governance and management structure, and financial and facilities plan. Starting a charter school in Illinois entails the threefold challenges of operating (1) a start-up business, (2) a nonprofit corporation, and (3) a public school that is strictly accountable to the chartering district (where applicable), the state, and the public at large. This is an enormously challenging undertaking that requires entrepreneurial spirit and

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<sup>1</sup> Millot, M. D. and Lake, R. J. (1996). *So You Want to Start a Charter School? Strategic Advice for Applicants*, University of Washington/RAND Program on Reinventing Public Education.

skills in addition to the capacity to fulfill the obligations of a public school. You will need expertise in a variety of areas as well as access to diverse resources in the community. A strong, well-rounded applicant team should include individuals who can bring skills and knowledge in the following areas:

- Policy
- Planning
- Fiscal Review
- Fundraising
- Hiring a CEO (or school director/principal)
- Communications/External Relations
- Board Development

Your team should have not only the financial capacity and technical skills to execute your proposed plan, but also the capacity *to build and maintain strong relationships and partnerships that are necessary for the creation, survival, and long-term success of your school*. Given funding constraints and other challenges, charter schools cannot operate as islands unto themselves; instead, they require a broad base of goodwill as well as more concrete community and civic support in order to survive and thrive. The ability to generate and maintain such support is critical to a strong applicant team and viable school plan.

These are some partnerships you might think about:

- Childcare centers, for before and after school care
- Fitness centers, gyms, and YMCA's for physical education activities
- Arts and drama organizations
- Music organizations, stores, and schools
- Hospitals, clinics and other healthcare providers
- Technology companies
- Food service providers
- Transportation companies

There are many other services, organizations, and groups to consider, and if you start partnering with them early, they will become invested in your school and support you throughout the difficult start-up phase and beyond.

Often, charter-planning groups hire a consultant to work with them. Make sure you *shop with care* and negotiate a clearly outlined contract.<sup>2</sup> For additional support in Chicago and the rest of Illinois, see the consultant list in Appendix K.

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<sup>2</sup> Premack, E. (2003). *The Charter School Development Guide* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). California: Charter Schools Development Center.

## Leadership

As Linda Brown notes in the *Massachusetts Charter Schools Handbook*,

*“Money and resources cannot compensate for ineffective leadership. You need not be a deep or original thinker to know that a group must be led by someone, not a committee nor a team. That someone must have special traits, qualities, and characteristics to enable people in the group to operate effectively and efficiently.”*

Perhaps above all, an effective leader must “facilitate the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of an educational vision that is shared and supported by the school community.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the visionary leadership needed to spearhead the charter design and development process, someone – a director, “school head,” “headmaster,” “rector,” “chief education officer,” or “principal” – will have to run the day-to-day operations of the school once the charter is approved. Choosing that person will be the applicant group’s most important personnel decision and the decision most important to the ultimate success of the charter school. The school’s leader will be the vital link between the charter school and the rest of the public school system, the school’s chartering authority and staff, the teachers, the parents, and the community at large.<sup>4</sup>

The hiring of a principal is easy when the founder of the school is to become the leader. However, in the case of a neighborhood organization or non-profit that starts a charter as a way to further serve its community, it is often a major challenge to find a principal. Several school leadership development programs have sprung up in recent years. New Leaders for New Schools ([www.nlens.org](http://www.nlens.org)) trains former teachers, business people, and other professionals to help stem the looming principal shortage. Also, several organizations have sprung up that recruit principals for independent schools such as charters. See [www.hirestandards.org](http://www.hirestandards.org).

See Appendix L for a sample job description of a charter school director.

## Community involvement and support

Building community around your school’s vision and design is critical for a successful charter school. Although bringing together many different stakeholders and agendas, including parents, community organizations, local government, and the local school district, requires substantial time and effort, these efforts will pay off in the end. An involved and supportive community will ensure buy-in, enhance the school’s viability in the eyes of potential funders, minimize opposition and negative press coverage, offer support during difficult times, and link the school to a network of much-needed resources. Charters have a

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<sup>3</sup> Chicago Principal Competency Definitions: #4--Visionary Leadership/Change Management. For more information on competency-based principal selection training, materials, and procedures, contact Chicago’s Partnership to Encourage the Next Century’s Urban Leaders (PENCUL) at (312) 499-4800.

<sup>4</sup> *District of Columbia Public Charter School Handbook: Strategic Advice for Planning a Public Charter School in the Nation’s Capital*. Public Charter School Resource Center, 18.

more tenuous existence than traditional schools, and it is imperative that charter schools have a constituency to fight for them, if necessary, when they come under fire.

Leadership for Quality Education's Charter School Resource Center has worked to organize grassroots support for charter schools and has given presentations to many different groups and audiences. We would be happy to present to your community, board, neighborhood, etc. to help your constituency understand what charter schools are and to dispel the many misperceptions that often surround discussions about charters.

## **How Will the Process Work?**

As we have said several times, and you are doubtless tired of reading, planning, designing, and launching a charter school will require an immense amount of time, energy, resources, and hard work. Moreover, experience has shown that the process often takes longer than anticipated. In addition to the year or so needed to prepare a high-quality proposal, substantial additional time is necessary to prepare for the school opening after the proposal is approved. Four of the eight charters approved in 1997 in Chicago opted to take a "planning year" in order to refine the school's educational program; raise additional funds; recruit, hire, and train staff; and prepare the facility before the school's first year of operation.

Finding a facility will be addressed more in depth in Chapter 13, but it is often the hardest piece of the puzzle to fit. During the proposal process, districts and the state (in the appeals process) often demand that developers have their facilities "available" immediately, which is a challenge without the per-pupil allotment sent when the school is opened.

### **Notes for applications outside of Chicago<sup>5</sup>**

Because of the historic truculence of districts outside of Chicago in their deliberations over the authorization of charter schools, you might want to start by enlisting the support of individual board members as opposed to the superintendent of the district in which you are applying. The superintendent only makes recommendations to the board, the board does the voting. It takes four of seven members to locally approve a charter. Local politics prevails here.

## **Preparing the Proposal**

View the charter application as a critical planning tool rather than a "hurdle" on the way to obtaining a charter.

Applicants should not approach the charter proposal as a grant application. A quality charter proposal must include much more than broad, ambitious promises of what the

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<sup>5</sup> Comments from Paul Seibert, Charter Consultants, Belleville, IL. (618) 233-0428

school will deliver. This document should cover the major planning issues facing the applicant, while providing a detailed school design plan that will ensure a viable school.

Illinois requires prospective charter founders to submit a written proposal to a local school district, in which they must specify how they would handle the many aspects of starting and running a public school – curriculum, assessment, facilities, financial and operational management, governance, and staffing. School districts may issue their own application formats, guidelines, and timelines (to the extent they are consistent with the Illinois Charter Schools Law). Currently only Chicago has issued an application. Potential charter applicants outside Chicago should contact their local school boards to inquire about application procedures or guidelines that may be in place. Outside of Chicago, it is unlikely you will receive help from the district offices. If you call LQE, we can let you know of others who have applied in your district, and you may be able to contact them and see what they learned. Outside of Chicago, the application process is typically one that you invent as you go along.

We strongly encourage you to study Chicago’s 2003 Charter School Application Format (see Appendix M). This format was carefully developed to provide strong planning assistance to charter school developers and is based directly on the requirements in Illinois’ charter school law. The format will serve you well as a planning tool, although application requirements and conditions in your district may vary somewhat. Please call the Chicago Public Schools Charter Schools Office at (773) 553-1535 to receive the full application from them. It includes an electronic version of the application.

Also see Appendix N for *Quality Indicators for Charter School Applications* from Duquesne University’s Charter Schools Project.

One way around challenging school boards is to have a flawless application although, even then, nothing is guaranteed. It is essential that you understand and address the “fiscal impact on the district” in your application and in your conversations with school district personnel. Many applications have been rejected on this basis. The law states that charter schools will receive between 75 and 125 percent of the *per capita tuition charge* for each student. In Chicago this number is about 83 percent. To find out what the *per capita tuition charge* in your district is call (217) 782-5256 or you can go to [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net) and click “*Ilearn*” and look for “*funding disbursement*” or “*district expenses*.”

### **More proposal writing tips**

As you begin to draft your own proposal, keep in mind that the Illinois Charter School Law requires the following 15 items in the proposal (see Appendix E):

1. Name of the proposed charter school
2. Student enrollment criteria and policies
3. Description of and addresses for at least two potentially available sites for the charter school –ISBE interprets this to mean that the facility must be secured for the school and approved by a school-certified architect

4. Mission statement/charter school goals
5. Goals, objectives, and pupil performance standards
6. For conversion schools only: evidence of majority approval by the school's teachers, parents, and (if applicable) local school council
7. Educational program (pupil performance standards, curriculum, calendar)
8. Accountability for achievement of pupil performance standards (assessments, timeline, plan for corrective reform)
9. Evidence of fiscally sound, proposed budget, financial and administrative audit; and (if applicable) plan for the displacement of pupils, teachers, and other employees
10. Description of school governance and operation, clearly outlined board structure from recruitment to tenure to committees, board by-laws
11. Explanation of the relationship between the school and its employees
12. Plans for liability and insurance coverage
13. Transportation plan for addressing needs of students – problematic for many charter developers appealing to the state. A charter school may be discriminating against children whose parents cannot transport them if the school does not provide busing. Options are to set up parent carpools or the provision of bus tokens for high school students. *It is important to give evidence that you have a transportation plan and that you have considered the issue fully.*
14. Proposed effective date and term of the charter
15. Additional information reasonably required by ISBE

You *absolutely* need to address all the points enumerated above. Proposals that do not comprehensively address the above issues will not receive proper consideration. This is especially true when a charter developer has had their application rejected by the local district and is appealing to the state. Lacking a clear appeals protocol, ISBE relies extensively on the wording of the Illinois Charter School Law to make determinations.

Recently several districts outside of Chicago have rejected charter applications based on a “negative fiscal impact” argument. This means that the district will lose too much revenue to the charter operator, and this loss of funds will adversely impact the traditional district schools. It is *imperative* that you understand the fiscal impact of your charter on the district.

### **Notes for applicants outside of Chicago**

One needs to write a charter with the possibility of local denial in mind. If a locally denied charter is appealed to the state board, it not only must be legally compliant, but it must be able to succeed without any assistance from the local board. For example, a charter proposal will likely have the local district providing special education services. This alone will not pass state board appeal, as ISBE, not the local board, now becomes the sponsor. There must be a stand-alone back up for special education as ISBE will not be a provider if approved. The same consideration applies to transportation, facilities, etc. Anything that you think the local board will provide must have an independent back up, and those

independent back-ups must be written in such a way as to not offend the district whose favor you are attempting to win.

Paul Seibert, of Charter Consultants in Belleville, IL, has been involved with several proposals that had been assured local approval, but were denied in the eleventh hour. The ISBE then also denied these proposals for lack of such backups as are described above. These backups were not included in the proposal so as not to offend the seemingly good intentions of the local superintendent and/or board.

## **Submitting the Proposal**

The following is a brief overview of the timeline set forth in Illinois' legislation for charter school applicants:

### **1. School submits application for charter approval to the local school district**

Although there is no state deadline for submission of charter applications, individual school boards may establish a deadline for receipt of materials. In the past, Chicago has had an October due date. Applicants must follow the guidelines in the state charter school law and should also follow any reasonable procedures established by local districts.

*Note:* According to Illinois state law, a local school board cannot condition approval of a charter application upon "re-regulation." The Illinois Charter Schools Law exempts charters from most of the rules and regulations that apply to regular public schools, and an authorizer cannot force a charter school to follow those rules or its own local policies. However, a charter school may voluntarily agree to comply with some or all.

### **2. Local school board reviews charter application**

Within forty-five days of receipt of a charter school proposal, the local school board shall publicize *and* convene a public meeting to obtain information to assist the board in its decision to grant or deny the charter school proposal.

### **3. Local school board votes on approval/denial of charter**

Within thirty days of the public meeting, the local school board shall vote in a public meeting to either grant or deny the charter school proposal. According to law, the local school district should grant proposals that:

- Demonstrate a high level of local pupil, parental, community, business, and school personnel support.
- Set rigorous levels of expected pupil achievement and demonstrate feasible plans for attaining those levels of achievement.
- Are designated to enroll and serve a substantial proportion of at-risk children, provided that nothing in the charter schools law shall be construed as intended to

limit the establishment of charter schools to those that serve a substantial portion of at-risk children or to in any manner restrict, limit, or discourage the establishment of charter schools that enroll and serve other pupil populations under a nonexclusive nondiscriminatory admissions policy (*open to all students*).

#### **4. Local school board reports approval/denial of charter to ISBE**

Within seven days of the board's public vote, the local school board shall file a report with ISBE granting or denying the proposal.

#### **5. ISBE reviews and certifies approved charter**

Within fourteen days of receipt of the local school board's report, ISBE shall determine whether the approved charter proposal is consistent with the provisions of the law and, if the approved proposal complies, certify the proposal.

#### **6. Denied charters appeal to ISBE**

Applicants can now *appeal* a local district's denial of their charter to ISBE. ISBE may reverse a local board's decision if ISBE finds that the charter school is in compliance with the law and is in the best interests of the students it is designed to serve. If ISBE on appeal reverses a local board's decision and approves a school's charter, ISBE shall act as the authorized chartering entity for that charter school. Prairie Crossing Charter School in Grayslake is a state authorized charter school. However, this is not a frequent occurrence. (*Note: Information on appealing a denial, if you should need it, and we hope you do not, is available at the Charter School Resource Center.*) Paul Seibert has dealt extensively with this appeal process and can be reached at (618) 233-0428.

See Appendix O for a press release detailing the appeal that YouthBuild Rockford has filed with ISBE regarding the district's rejection of their charter application.

#### **The special challenge of applying for a charter school outside of Chicago**

It is important to establish a *good, mutually respectful relationship and clear, open, ongoing communication* with your local school district officials from the outset. Remember, your charter school will be a part of the community and will benefit from the support of the local district far beyond the simple granting of the charter. It would be ill advised to "spring" a proposal on the district without prior notice or communication of your group's interest and intentions. However, you must be strategic.

Groups that have applied for charter schools outside of Chicago have met with negativity and often hostility towards their quest. Most school districts (big and small, although the small ones have more credibility with this argument) state that opening a charter would represent an overwhelming financial burden for their district. They perceive charters as "taking money away from the public schools." In addition, most school boards do not know what a charter school is.



There are two strategies to deal with this: (1) make early connections individually with school board members and let them see the value of your plan, or (2) do not tell anyone close to the district of your plans because that will give them more time to mobilize against you. Either way, getting your proposal approved is going to be a challenge.

Charter applicants all over the state from Champaign to Rockford to East St. Louis have been battling stubborn school districts that refuse to see the potential of charter schools. It is important that developers speak of charter schools as being “one strategy in the overall effort to improve schools,” not as an attempt to overthrow the current system. At LQE, we like to say that charters help meet the needs of students who are not thriving in traditional settings. In this way they are supporting traditional schools, not supplanting them. And always, always remind your friends and foes that charter schools *are* public schools.

It is imperative that you understand the political forces at work on your local school board. If you are addressing a well-known weakness in district offerings, your application will have a greater chance of acceptance. Keep in mind, though, that your school must be open to all students. For example, if you wish to set up a charter school for gifted students, you are not allowed any admissions requirements and must admit students regardless of if they have been designated gifted or not.

Evaluating a charter proposal and serving as a charter authorizer are serious public responsibilities, and it is appropriate for school board and district officials to embark on the chartering process with care. You may wish to refer your local educational officials to LQE’s Charter School Resource Center as well, as we can offer them some assistance in understanding and carrying out their new charter-authorizing responsibilities in a fair, thoughtful manner.

## **Timelines**

See Appendix G for two planning timeline examples. The Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center also has a great timeline. For the PDF of their handbook, visit [www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrc/cshb/](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org/csrc/cshb/). You can download individual sections, such as “Workplan” and “Timeline,” or order the whole book.